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THE MANTRA OF BUCHAREST*

Abstract

Jenia Isaac, a secondary character in Mircea Eliade's novel "Maitreyi," decides to come to Bucharest around 1990 upon reading the novel, because she wants to see the places associated with the author. She debates, with her young guide (and Eliade scholar) Andrei Florescu, the nature of her relationship with Eliade and what it means to be a secondary character. Their interaction forces Andrei to make a momentous decision that will impact the rest of his life.

Keywords: Mircea Eliade, Maitreyi, Bucharest, India, Tantra, magic, intertextuality, love, relationships, age, immortality, fiction.

Andrei woke up with a headache. He lifted his head from the pillow with a considerable effort and looked around. The morning light crept through the dark curtains and illuminated a square room with flower-patterned wallpaper peeling off the wall in a few places. It wasn't Andrei's room. He turned: a woman was sleeping next to him. Her face, in a halo of unwashed blond hair with dark roots showing, was young. Andrei remembered the day before, remembered how the drinking started, and, after a short struggle with his memory, remembered her name: Ileana. His clothes lay in a heap in the corner, but he could reach, without getting up, the pack of cigarettes and the lighter that were on the floor next to a cracked saucer that served as an ashtray and was overfilled with yesterdays' cigarette butts.

He lit a cigarette and inhaled the first smoke of the day. He wouldn't be able to feel awake without it, although it would have made more sense to stealthily get dressed and get out, before the woman woke up. The good thing about being poor was not having a phone: nobody could harass him with calls, and maintaining the contact was entirely up to him. The

* The text will be included in Maria Rybakova's novella-collection *Quaternity* that will appear with Ibidem Verlag.

bad thing about being poor was a) having to constantly borrow or steal books; b) not being able to travel to India.

It reminded him: Mrs. Jones.

Mrs. Jones. How could he have been so stupid. He looked at the small alarm clock that, due to the general lack of furniture in this room, was also standing on the floor.

He still has time to get to the hotel, if he runs (that is, if he understands correctly where he is at the moment: yesterday they walked quite a lot, from one apartment to the other, all of them filled with people and the smoke and conversations and cheap booze and giggling girls, and then he ended up here with this woman, Ileana). He remembered the street they had walked on in the dark: he recognized a school there. The walk from here to the hotel would take about forty minutes. He could ride the metro, but it would take about the same time. The walk would clear his head. Petrica got him a strange kind of tourist-guide-for-two-days job: Andrei had to not just show the city to a Western tourist, but to show the places connected to Mircea Eliade in particular. A rich lady traveled from Australia – or was it South Africa? – to see the street where Eliade was born. Not that Andrei didn't share her enthusiasm: he knew everything that had to do with Eliade in his town. But still. Westerners aren't too eager to travel here. They still think there may be shooters on the rooftops left over from December. Everyone in the world is still shocked. The president and his wife being both shot, and their bodies caught on camera. If the soldiers hadn't tied them up, they would have held hands, perhaps. And Ceausescu singing the "Internationale" before being wiped out.

Petrica said the lady was very old but paid well. It has to be a slow tour, he said. Otherwise the lady might kick the bucket right in the street. Petrica offered to find someone who could drive her around instead, but she said she wanted to walk. Just a short taxi ride, maybe. And then walk. She walks with a stick. She's a weird one, Petrica said. Makes little grimaces. As if she's flirting or something. You've got to get a bit soft in your head, alas, when you reach that age. You'll see for yourself. It's strange that her family even let her fly here, let alone spend all this money. Anyway, said Petrica, that could be quite a contribution towards your future trip to India and the new edition of the "Yoga." How's your study of Sanskrit, by the way? Still at it?

Andrei couldn't remember how the conversation ended exactly, but he had agreed and written down when and where he was supposed to meet Mrs. Jones. He had already lost the sheet of paper, of course, but in

his mind's eye he still saw his note, written down in Sanskrit characters: it was his practice now to write everything down in Devanagari, to make sure he remembered the signs (he had made the mistake of learning first the transliterated version, and now the switch to original characters was painful). He got out of bed moving cautiously and tiptoed towards his clothes. Ileana said something inaudible and moved in her sleep. Gingerly he got himself into his trousers, his shirt and his socks, and looked around for his shoes and the jacket. He couldn't see them anywhere.

"Andrei."

She remembers my name, he thought. That's a bad sign.

"Where are you going?"

She sat on the bed, half-naked, her breasts exposed, and Andrei's determination to leave somewhat waned. He had to remind himself that the chapter on Tantrism and Hathayoga awaits its commentary. The work will help him make a name for himself, and Ileana's breasts won't. He picked up the pack of cigarettes from the floor, then remembered that they belonged to her and put them back, saying: "Need to rush. Urgent work. A foreign colleague is waiting. It was a pleasure! Do you remember where I left my shoes?"

"Will I see you tonight?" she asked.

"The shoes, dear," he repeated and realized that both the shoes and the jacket were in the tiny hall adjacent to the door. "Of course," he said. She probably expected him to kiss her, but he didn't feel like mixing his morning breath with hers. He blew Ileana an air kiss – "Pa și pusi!" – and rushed into the hall to grab his shoes and jacket before she had time to say anything else.

Besides the cigarettes and a few lei, he had some gravel-stones in his pockets, to throw them at the packs of dogs roaming the streets. He must be vigilant when he walks with the old lady. Protect her from the animals and the like. Maybe she could go at them with her stick, though. If she was tough enough to fly all the way here from Cape Town – or where's she from? – then the stray dogs will probably scare her no more than a swarm of mosquitoes. He deftly navigated the crooked streets on his way to the University. He hoped that the demons in Hell were now dropping large slabs of concrete on the dead Nicolae and Elena, to punish them for destroying his city. They've got to have some sort of 'bodies' there in the underworld, didn't they? Otherwise the punishment wouldn't be as effective. He imagined how, amongst eternal fires and screams, every five

minutes or so a great slab of concrete falls on the evil couple and crushes them over and over again.

He couldn't believe his luck that he could enter that hotel. He always dreamed of going there. There were always rumors that it was a den of international spies and intrigue. He imagined them in their impeccable Western clothes, nursing a whisky in the English bar and speaking in hushed tones. There are probably no spies there now. It's surprising the hotel is even open, given the paucity of the tourists and what happened on the square in front of it so recently. The façade still looks damaged. But still. Inside it must be luxurious. Full of informers just a year ago. Every room bugged, every prostitute reporting on her clients. And now? Maybe they still do. But not on Mrs. Jones. She doesn't sound like she could be a spy. Maybe she's a former émigré? Who married a foreigner and then took his name? And now she's coming back home to die? I do hope she doesn't die on me, thought Andrei and surreptitiously crossed himself.

He entered the lobby through a revolving door and stopped in front on the receptionist's desk. A uniformed woman and a uniformed man with stern faces both looked up at him. He didn't know which one to address and started speaking to both at once, turning his head right and left. He mumbled that he had an appointment with Mrs. Jones who was a guest here and who was waiting for him. He half-expected to be refused entry and thrown out, but the man raised his palm and started dialing the phone. "He's here," he said in English, and then, to Andrei: "Please go up to her room. She is expecting you." He pointed with his chin towards the elevator.

Marveling at his freedom of movement, Andrei crossed the grey lobby with the marble floor and pressed the elevator button. He thought that maybe the lift would have an operator, but it was, alas, a regular elevator, just very clean and with a mirror inside. On the second floor he turned and walked, on a soft rug, up the corridor. The hotel was completely quiet. He wondered again whether it had any other guests, beside Mrs. Jones. He knocked, very quietly. He then thought that the lady, being so old, was most probably hard of hearing, and therefore it was not the time and the place to be shy. He knocked again, louder, then pressed the door, which yielded, allowing him to enter.

"Good morning, Mrs. Jones," he said quickly and cheerfully, before he even had a chance to look at her, since it was the phrase he had prepared on his way up. Then he looked.

What he noticed first were her pearls. Multiple strings of heavy pearls, five or six or maybe seven, were circling her neck and making it seem

impossibly thin. The skin on that thin neck was loose and leathery, like that of a turtle. Her eyes seemed very big behind her thick glasses, and so did her nose. Andrei read somewhere that a person's nose never stops growing: that's why old people all seem to be long-nosed. He kept this observation for himself, though. Mrs. Jones did not raise herself from the armchair to greet him but extended her hand. Thankfully he had the wits to walk over and kiss it. Her nails were painted bright red.

Mrs. Jones gestured towards a chair, and he took it as an invitation to sit down.

"May I offer you something?" she asked in a throaty, raspy voice of a life-long smoker. He noticed an open pack of "Kent" on the table. She saw his glance and offered it to him, striking a lighter as soon as he put a cigarette in his mouth. It was strange to be proffered light by a woman, even by an old one.

He inhaled and looked at her again, racking his brains as what to say next. How old was she really? Her lips were so thin they wouldn't be noticeable if she hadn't covered them in red lipstick whose brightness rivaled that of the nail polish. She was very ugly, with that wrinkly face in an almost-bold head with a few wispy strands of hair. Gigantic, incongruous earrings extended her huge earlobes. Her dress, made of something bright and shimmering, rustled with her every move. Beyond the aroma of good tobacco, he sensed the sour smell of medicine in the room, a smell he associated with old people. That and the smell of urine – the odors of decay.

He saw a violin on the bed, and, next to it, a whole block of duty-free "Kents."

"Do you play?" he asked, because he couldn't think of anything else to say.

"Yes," she said. "I used to play the cello. Now I am sticking to the violin. Do you play an instrument?"

"Unfortunately, no."

"Should I play for you?" she asked, suddenly and loudly, raising her head as if she were challenging him to something.

In his embarrassment he didn't know what to answer. He hadn't come to hear her play, but, on the other hand, declining her offer may seem rude.

"I would be very grateful," he said, "But I don't want to impose on your time."

"It's not an imposition," she answered. "It would be my pleasure. But maybe… later…"

She lit a cigarette. Her fingers were long but crooked. He couldn't understand how she could play the violin with such arthritic-looking fingers. "Well, tell me about yourself, if you don't mind," she said.

Why hadn't she died of cancer, he thought, if she smokes so much? Must not be as bad a habit as doctors claim, after all.

This thought made him draw in on his "Kent" with redoubled pleasure.

"I like Mircea Eliade's work very much," he said. "It would be a pleasure to serve as your guide. I first discovered his novella 'With the Gypsies,' and I was mesmerized. I never read anything like this before – you know, we had mostly socialist realism in our literature, with no place for the fantastic or for the other-worldly."

She was nodding, and the loose skin above her pearls was slightly shaking.

"Since then, I tried to find as many books by Eliade as possible," Andrei continued. "We had so few. I searched the used book shops, asked friends. I found out about how he was in India and how he wrote about loving a woman there. And then I discovered his Yoga treatise. It interests me. It interests me a lot."

The woman kept nodding.

"I met him in India, you know," she said with a smile. Her teeth were big and white, and looked unnaturally healthy in such an old woman. "Unfortunately, we met only briefly. I will tell about it, if you want. Afterwards."

"I would love that," he said sincerely.

Then she nodded towards the window and asked: "Have you been there?" It took him a few moments to understand that she means the events on the square. He half-nodded, half shrugged, noncommittally.

"Too bad I couldn't get one of the rooms facing the Palace. Too damaged from bullets and such like. They are not using that part of the hotel now. What a pity. I would have had such an amazing view."

One day the view might have been amazing, he thought, but now the former Royal Palace was covered in scaffolding. The round Atheneum looked awful, and so did the building of the former Central Committee on whose balcony Ceausescu gave the last public speech of his career. Everything in that square was crumbling or covered in bullet holes. What could she find so beautiful here? It was gorgeous once, in another era. Maybe she has the ability to see the past. That woman who supposedly

knew Eliade in India. She may be lying, of course. But if she's not, that's a really curious case.

He didn't dare to press her with questions but walked back to his chair and extinguished his cigarette in the ashtray. She did the same and looked at him with a sense of expectation.

"I propose we begin by going to the place where Eliade's childhood house stood, on Strada Radu Cristian, formerly Melodiei" he said. "It is, unfortunately, long gone. There is a grey apartment block there now. Nothing exciting. But one could still feel the atmosphere. We could see what he saw when he was a child. Then we could walk from that place to the Mantuleasa street, where his primary school was located. The school building still stands, thankfully."

"Pe strada Mantuleasa," she said and nodded, revealing her knowledge of another of Eliade's books.

"Yes, exactly!" he said. "But I suggest we first take the taxi to the Strada Radu Cristian. It is a bit far from here. He lived there as a teenager and left it to go to India when he was twenty-one. I am sure you know it. I just thought I would remind you. Just in case." He stopped talking, embarrassed. He asked himself again how old she must be now, if she had met Eliade in India? She must be in her late eighties. That is, if she was a young girl when they met. Well, in all probability, she's got to have been a young girl then. Otherwise she couldn't possibly be still alive. It's not easy to imagine her young, though. Young and full of life, thirsty for adventure, otherwise why would she go to India. Although it may have been easy for South Africans to get there, they were British subjects in the 1920s, weren't they? Unlike traveling there now for us, he thought. Still, one day I will get there. And an Indian woman may fall in love with me some day.

"Then we could go see the University, the Cișmigiu Parc…" he continued.

"Let's take it slow," she said and, with a considerable effort, lifted herself from the arm chair. "Could you bring me my stick, please?"

He turned and saw a black walking stick leaning on the wall. He stood up to get it, and, in passing, saw a slim volume on the table, with a bookmark in the middle of it: "Noces au Paradis," Eliade's "Wedding in Heaven" in the Gallimard edition. For a second, he almost wanted to ask her if she would lend him the book but thought better of it. Evidently, she was in the process of reading it herself, and he didn't want to seem impertinent. But the book piqued his curiosity. He knew it was based on

Eliade's former love affairs, one with his future wife Nina, the other with the actress Sorana Topa. Eliade combined them into one character, that of Ileana/Lena (Ileana, he thought, like the woman I just spent the night with; should I call her later?).

"Do you know that he started writing this book…" Andrei held out the stick to her and she clasped its handle in her arthritic hands.

"Yes?" she asked.

…When he was in prison with the Iron Guardists, Andrei wanted to say, but saw the expression in her eyes and stopped himself. That was the moment when Andrei understood that she had loved him. This old ugly lady used to be in love with Mircea Eliade. When they were both young.

This realization gave Andrei a pause. He felt sometimes, suddenly and despite himself, a curious mixture of anger and pity whenever he saw how old people were trying something in vain, something that escaped them in their youth. He saw them forget for a second about their age only to be reminded a moment later that they were reaching the final part of their journey in this world. He felt anger at that inexorable forward march of Time that mocks the soul, makes it small and helpless, a subject to ageing and finally death, forcing it to say its goodbyes before it is ready or willing to go. The eyes of this old hag were, for a second, those of a young girl who was about to confess her feelings, and for that very second Andrei wished he could give her back her youth.

He didn't know why that overwhelming pity for old people assaulted him from time to time with such violence. He was not inclined to sentimentality. He fancied himself quite a heart-breaker, a ladies' man, a cynic.

"Mircea Eliade wrote this book" (Andrei pointed to the "Noces") "when he lived on the Dacia Boulevard in his thirties. That house is still standing. It is not far from here. We could go there if you wish," he added.

"I'd rather go to the Melodiei Street first," she answered. "I mean, to Radu Cristian. Whatever it is called. I like to see where a person spent his childhood. I am originally from Helsinki myself. When it was still part of the Russian Empire."

"So… You are a Finn?"

"No, no, I am not," she laughed. He couldn't understand what could be so funny about being Finnish, but let it slip. "My family emigrated to South Africa. It was better for people like us there. At that time, at least. I played in the municipal orchestra, you know. In Cape Town. Do you love music, mister Florescu?"

"Andrei, please. Just call me Andrei," he hurried to say.

"In that case, you should call me Jenia," she parried with a smile that could only be described as coquettish. Now Andrei understood what Petrica had meant when he talked about her grimacing. It was very unpleasant: that crooked smile, that little girlish giggle. And yet he felt compelled, by some inexplicable force, to kiss her hand again. It wasn't even prescribed by the etiquette. A man was supposed to kiss a lady's hand when greeting her and when saying goodbye. But not when they switched to the first-name basis – or was he? Maybe it was customary after all. Some vague memory raised from the depths of his brain and forced him to take her proffered hand with long crooked fingers – somewhat less crooked now, the conversation must have relaxed them – and kiss it. Maybe it was a vague feeling of guilt that he was only half-conscious of, the guilt of the young and the healthy.

"Let's go, shall we?" she said and marched to the door leaning heavily on her stick. Andrei turned the handle and opened the door for her, then followed her on the soft carpet to the elevator. He pressed the button and waited, in silence, till the cabin got there. Once they were inside, he pressed the button again and tried to look into a corner, or at his feet, or at the ceiling, in order not to stare at the old woman who stood so close to him. From the corner of his eye he could see, however, that she scrutinized his face, with a little smile on her lips. He knew that the features of his face were too vivid to be considered handsome (when he thought about the male beauty ideal he imagined an implacable square-jawed giant like Arnold Schwarzenegger). But girls liked him. It may be his conversation – he knew a bit of everything – or his light touch, or his pretended self-assurance. He didn't actually know why they kept falling for him, but he always thought that he had to move quickly, before they wised up to his real self. His real self he thought, nobody could ever fancy, what with his strange feelings of guilt, pity, anger, and a longing for India that would come suddenly upon him, out of nowhere.

On the Radu Cristian Street, Andrei opened the door of the taxi and helped the old lady to get out. Then he reached inside and brought out her cane, which she gratefully accepted. They stood in front of the multi-story apartment block, built on the spot where Eliade's family house once stood. The structure was grey, fortress-like, with small windows. "No real traces left here," said Andrei, "But look at the beautiful old house in front. Look at that bay window. Mircea could probably watch it from his

attic. He talked about observing a loving couple and wishing himself to have a little wife."

From his jacket pocket Andrei extracted a cherished copy of the "Diary of A Short-Sighted Adolescent" that appeared in 1988, with a photo of young Eliade on the third page. He remembered buying it two years ago and reading it through in just one night, with a mixture of admiration and superiority, feeling so much older that the teenage author, if not in years than in historical experience. It would have never occurred to Andrei to whip himself like a medieval monk or to sleep-deprive himself until he would start hallucinating. But he was familiar with that desire "to show them," to become a great man to the astonishment of all who knew him and didn't believe in him. He just didn't know yet in what particular field his future greatness lay. Something to do with India, he thought. Or maybe with politics. Or writing.

"You know that he wrote this novel before he was twenty, but they rediscovered it only in the 1980s? It just stayed in some box all this time, with his other papers. Most of them written in that attic which he also described in the novel. He sat there and wrote about how he sat there and wrote… I think he started scribbling when it was raining. It was raining, and he felt alone. Did you know, by the way, that the very first story he ever wrote was titled 'How I Found the Philosopher's Stone'?"

The old woman, still gazing at the grey building, replied:

"Oh yes. And he looked for it his whole life, I suppose." With a chuckle, she drew something out of the pocket of her rustling dress. "But he looked in all the wrong places. Here it is." She stretched her arm towards Andrei. "Try it. What do you see?"

He looked down at what she had put into his palm.

It was a small piece of rock crystal, with just one side smooth and polished, and others still rough. For a few moments Andrei tried to gaze into the smooth side, but could only see something very vague, perhaps a dim reflection of his own face. With a shrug, he gave the stone back: "Sorry, I cannot see anything."

The woman – Jenia, he reminded himself, she wants me to call her Jenia – started turning the rock in her long fingers, and he thought again that these fingers must have preserved their agility despite their appearance. She kept turning it and then lowered her face to the crystal so that her nose was almost touching it.

"I see a room… And a boy… A blue table, a red bed…"

God, why on earth did I agree to take this job, thought Andrei. She must be senile, or else why would she be delivering that crazy performance in front of my eyes.

Her monologue went on for quite some time. She was talking more to herself than to him, describing a lamp with a white shade, an herbarium, Egyptian signs on the walls of the attic, pictures of tomb frescoes, books everywhere. "Ugly boy, ugly boy in spectacles. But smart, oh so smart, so smart, hee-hee."

"Can you see the Green Room, too?" asked Andrei.

He had no idea why he asked her that. He remembered reading, in a smuggled copy of Eliade's autobiography, that, as a child, Mircea walked into a room with green curtains and felt like he was being held by the hand of God. Later, whenever he remembered it, Mircea fell into some kind of a trance.

"Well," Jenia answered. "Look for yourself."

Her fingers with their blood-red nails held the stone in front of his eyes. This time he didn't take it into his hand, out of a mixture of fear and disgust. But he couldn't resist looking into the smooth surface of the crystal.

Inside there was something green, glimmering. The longer he looked the better he could discern the contours of a room. It was as if the smooth surface of the stone grew in size. It offered him now a detailed view of a row of floor-to-ceiling windows covered with silk green curtains. The daylight was penetrating the room through these curtains, coloring the walls into the curious greenish color. Andrei saw bric-a-brac on a small table carved out of dark wood: some toy soldiers, three miniature elephants, a Chinese statuette. There was a long sofa and large empty armchairs as well. He walked over to a Venetian mirror on the wall and saw his own reflection. He was four or five years old, in a little boy's costume. The mirror was large and dark. He could see his face: it was a handsome face. He liked it. He wanted to stay there and keep looking at himself. He felt *seen* by the dark, enticing depth of this mirror. He felt loved.

"Do you see anything?"

The voice startled him. He looked at her but saw, instead, a little girl who was glancing back at him, intensely peering into his eyes. The girl was led away by an old man. The man kept walking forward and was pulling at her arm, but the girl kept turning back to Andrei, not willing to break this eye contact. And he, again, felt so – so *seen*, so happily and joyfully and lovingly seen by this girl that he felt a seizure coming up, a pressure mounting somewhere in his brain. He made himself squeeze his

eyes shut, counted to five and opened them again. Jenia was putting the stone back into her pocket. They were standing in front of the same grey building on the Radu Cristian Street.

"What was that?" he asked.

"What do you mean, Andrei?"

He suddenly felt embarrassed, as if he had fallen asleep on the job. She must have caught him day-dreaming. "Sorry, Mrs. Jones. I mean, Jenia. Really sorry. Never you mind. I think I got lost in my thoughts for a moment."

She giggled: a little-girl giggle, bewildering and unpleasant.

"Will you show me now where his school stood?" she asked.

They walked along the curving tramway rails, past the island of the 'Church with the Saints' with its curious frescoes of Greek philosophers (including Hermes Trismegistus and the Sybil). They turned again and again, eventually coming to the Negustori Street and walking up it until it crossed the Mantuleasa Street in front of a little square. It was more of a triangle than a square. Jenia pointed to a bench there and said that she would like to rest a bit.

As soon as they sat down, pigeons started coming down in droves. The birds walked to and fro in front of them expecting to be fed. "Sorry," said the old woman. "I really have nothing to give you at this moment." She opened her purse and searched inside. She found a big black wallet, fished out a few notes and asked Andrei: "Would you mind going and buying some bread for them?" When she saw hesitation on his face, she put the money back and said, as if agreeing with his objection: "All right, all right, I know, we shouldn't be feeding them, they are vermin, after all…"

The birds, however, kept coming and coming, and soon the little square was covered in blue and reddish feathery bodies. Andrei who always felt an aversion to pigeons couldn't wait to get up and continue walking, but the old lady seemed tired, and therefore they had to stay there a little while. The pigeons were making guttural noises, and Jenia seemed to be listening to them tilting her head to one side. With her big spectacles, her long nose and a bald head, she resembled a bird herself.

"So, where was the school?" she asked.

"Just a few steps away. It's an old building. There is talk of demolishing it."

"All right. We will walk there. Let's just take a few more moments to rest. Look, another pretty church. You have so many of them in this city."

Andrei looked ahead, to the little church. “It has a bestiary painted there,” he said. “A unicorn, a centaur…”

No car passed them by, and there was no sound except for the one the pigeons were making. An old tree was partly covering the church from their view. This this street seemed so old, so far it was removed from the big-city noises, that they could have been sitting there seventy years ago. Jenia searched inside her purse. She took out a pack of cigarettes, gave one to Andrei, took one herself. Then she subjected him, again, to the somewhat emasculating ritual of clicking the lighter in front of the tip of his cigarette. He inhaled deeply and asked:

“How does Cape Town look like?”

“Very beautiful,” she answered enthusiastically. “Very, very beautiful. So much sun. And the ocean, and the mountains! You should visit it.”

Yeah, a fat chance I will get to travel there, Andrei thought bitterly.

“And India, too. You ought to go to India,” she added.

“I have always wanted. But how was it – then?”

“Not at all like he describes,” Jenia turned to him, and Andrei had to draw back, so close was her face to his now. “I didn’t fall sick at his place. I didn’t even stay at his place. I had my own kutyar. A bungalow, you know. A hut. Mine was right at the river shore. Swami Shivananda gave it to me before leaving. He was very impressed with me. Very, very impressed. Just think: a young woman going to India all on her own in the 1920s. Yes, I went in search of the Absolute. And what was so funny about that, I ask you? What was so absurd? A lot of people had gone there in search of the Absolute later. Even famous people. Only we were the first. Mircea and me, and almost nobody else. I mean, no other Westerners. Now, I have heard, that shore is littered with Western rubbish. All these tourists go there and party. But not us. We were serious about our spiritual search. Very serious. You want to know how Mircea and I got into talking?”

She was drawing closer and closer to his face, and he felt a drip of her spittle landing on his cheek. He was, however, intrigued, if there was any chance she was not just confabulating. He remembered that there was, indeed, a character named ‘Jenia’ in the “Maitreyi.” She appeared somewhere close to the end of the novel. Andrei couldn’t remember much about her. Then one that made a strong impression on him was Maitreyi, Narendra Sen’s daughter, with her poetry and her unusual way of speaking. And then there appeared a character named ‘Jenia’ in the protagonist’s life: a disappointment, an afterthought.

"Swami Shivananda introduced us," she continued. "We sat on my terrace and drank cocoa. Mircea said he was writing a doctoral thesis on yoga. Later he told me about the tantric practices. He came every evening. We just sat and talked. He told me how to find an object for meditation. I meditated every day, you know. I sat in the lotus position, looked at the river and meditated. He said that I must choose a god to meditate on. Such was the tantric practice. But I didn't know that much about the tantric gods. So, I thought of Mircea. I sat there and thought of him during the day, and it really helped me to concentrate. You know, by the way, how I decided to come to India? I saw a bookshop in my dream. Mircea recorded it in his book, actually. In his mocking way. Everything to do with me, he mocked. My search of the Abolute, my Ramacharaka book. I didn't know Mircea had became a writer, let alone that he wrote about me. I read his novel just two years ago. He had written very little about me, mind you, but still. He recorded that dream of mine – I almost forgot about it myself. I had dreamt – I was still in Cape Town at that time – I dreamt that I was passing a bookshop in my car. And then, one day, I took a wrong turn and ended up in a neighborhood where I had never been before. Suddenly I see something that I had seen before: that bookshop. It took me a few moments to realize where I had seen it, in a dream, how curious."

She became silent. Andrei looked at the tip of his cigarette, at the tiny red burning dot, at the smoke escaping from it and departing for the cloudless sky. The pigeons kept walking around, cooing, fat and self-satisfied, bobbing their heads. Three emaciated dogs appeared from behind a corner and jogged past, not paying Andrei and Mrs. Jones any attention. Andrei looked at the tip of the church, but a car appeared, and the quiet was broken.

"I went inside and bought something," Jenia continued. "Mircea laughed a lot when he heard it. He despised the author. Yogi Ramacharaka – you probably never head the name. At that time, he was all the rage. Him and Blavatsky. Ramacharaka was an Englishman, actually. In India, Mircea despised all the English. Later I learned to despise them too, but when I had bought this book back in Cape Town, it was a revelation for me. Probably sounds funny now, but at that time… The idea that one can achieve enlightenment by breathing, by exercise, by concentration – it was all new to me. Especially the idea that everything around us is but an illusion. I had kind of intuited it, even before reading, but when the book stated it, so clearly, so eloquently, I was truly impressed. It said that

happiness was possible, or at least a way out of suffering. One just needed to learn the right thinking and how to be detached."

She turned her beak to Andrei with such vehemence that, startled, he almost lost his cigarette.

"Tell me, young man, are you a Christian? Or a Communist?"

"I am… I would describe myself as an Orthodox Christian," he said after some musing. He couldn't understand what she was driving at.

"Then tell me, young man, what does this saying mean: *For unto everyone who has, to him shall be given. But from him that has not shall be taken away even that which he has*? We had religion classes at school in my time. I was obliged to attend even though I was not a Christian, you understand. I was always bored with our Western ways of understanding religion, even before going to India. But ever since I heard this, I kept thinking about it. I thought about this saying again and again. What does it mean? What do you make of it?"

"You think it may have something to do with yoga? With detachment? Maybe with having contentment?" He searched for an answer that she was evidently looking for.

"No, no, young man." She shook her head and the turtle skin on her neck shook too. "It was nothing to do with yoga. It has to do with me, Andrei. With my life. I knew it rightaway when I first heard it. I just never wanted to believe it."

She clutched her stick with both hands, one still holding the cigarette, and knocked it on the ground forcefully. Then she drew on the cigarette again, inhaled, waited a few moments before exhaling. She seemed to have calmed down.

"Mircea had his own version," she said. "To me, he seemed to have his own version of everything. Only twenty-three years old – that's what I was thinking of him at that time – only twenty-three, and he already knows everything. I felt he thought about everything, he had ideas about everything! He told me to read Evola and Avalon instead. But I rather preferred to listen to his own words. I asked him to explain things to me. He visited me every evening. We sat on the terrace, we drank cocoa. He talked about yoga, about Tantra. Do you find us ridiculous?"

"No."

"Don't, young man. Don't laugh at the youth of the old people, because one day somebody might laugh at your own youth. Do you know what Tantra is?"

"I read Eliade's book on yoga, actually," said Andrei.

"I thought his books were prohibited here?"

"No, you could find some… And some were actually reissued… And then there are used-book shops… Obscure libraries… Private collections… You just needed to know people."

"And did you like it? The book?"

"I liked it very much," said Andrei. "I thought I told you. One day I hope to write a commentary on it."

"Oh! A commentary? Very commendable, young man, very commendable." She started giggling again, with that girlish giggle that seemed to Andrei inappropriate and looney. "In that case, you might find it interesting that I saw him writing that book. That thesis. He said it was a doctoral thesis. Am I right? A thesis. He had many papers and books everywhere. He wore a whilte dhoti, you know, we were the first Westerners to adopt the Indian dress. He wore a dhoti, I wore a sari. Wait, what was I talking about? Ah, yes, he was writing that – that thing, – and he always talked with me about it in the evening. It's curious, you know, how well I remember his voice and how little I remember what he was actually saying. He had thin lips. His mouth was cruel. Yet his eyes, his eyes, you know, they were short-sighted, not strong."

She fell silent. Andrei looked at her from a corner of his eye. Like other old people, she made a chewing movement when she was lost in her thoughts. Then she said:

"Well, you know… I tried doing that on my own. Every day I tried to remember what he said and I tried practicing it. The postures. Breathing in and out, consciously. He said that the more you meditate on something, the better you know it. And the better you know it, the more you have power over it. Thus, you can get the power over the sun, the stars. The river. Or even the time. I thought of him, actually. I sat there, and I envisioned him, Mircea, and I thought of him, and I thought that I knew him. Maybe not very well, but intuitively. Then he told me all about how he had loved this Indian girl and how it broke his heart. I thought of that, too, when I sat on my terrace in meditation. I thought and I thought. Did I hope it would bring me power over him? Maybe. I thought he kept coming because the power of my thought invoked him. Not my cocoa or my gramophone. I had some records with me, you know. We listened to Grieg, to Schubert. Imagine, Andrei, this music actually fits well with the Ganges. Sounds strange, but it really does. Once you go to Rishikesh, bring a recording of 'Peer Gynt' with you. Sit on the shore and listen to it. Maybe you'll

slide back in time and you'll suddenly find yourself back in the 20s with Mircea and me, hee-hee."

She shook her head.

"Well, anyway. I thought he was coming. But one night he simply forgot. I waited and I cried, and then I went and knocked at his door. And he said he was coming. I put my transparent sari, you know, and made up my face."

"What did you do it for?" asked Andrei. The question came out unexpectedly even for him, but he persisted. "Did you want to seduce him?"

"He came and though I was a *nayika*," the woman continued without paying any heed to his question. She giggled again. "You know who is a nayika?"

"The woman, the tantric partner."

"Yes. I was the Shakti, the goddess. I was the concubine. I was the lover. It was me, me! He never slept with her." She laughed derisively. At first Andrei didn't realize whom she meant. Then he understood: Maitreyi.

"It was me," she insisted. "It was me, it was me."

But it didn't matter, Andrei wanted to say, since Mircea loved the other woman. You were incidental, a secondary character, an afterthought. It was strange that she still hadn't understood this. He didn't say anything though. He waited a few moments to see if she tells him anything else. But, since she was silent, he coughed to clear his throat and said: "How about we go to see the school building now? If you are not too tired?"

Many years later, when working on his commentary under the contract with the publisher, Andrei, who, by that time, was already a member of several international – and one Royal – academic societies and married to an Indian woman with a doctorate in Political Science (she taught in the UK and they flew to visit each other every other weekend: theirs was an utterly modern marriage), he remembered that conversation, and went to his bookshelf to pick up Eliade's autobiography. He read how the young Eliade entered Jenia's bungalow, and found her transformed. She was not a shy and silly girl anymore. She was suddenly imbued with a seductive power of a divinity, and even the white walls of her hut emanated some foreboding of an initiation. Mircea felt that something dangerous was about to engulf him, unless he turned on his heels and fled. It was a momentary and a momentous decision, he wrote. The fates have put her on his way

in order that to teach him something. Jenia was the first real challenge on his way towards spiritual perfection. To run away would have been cowardice. He thought he must take up this ordeal head-on.

The rest was left to the reader's imagination.

Andrei sat down in an armchair with the book and thought about their tantric exercises: breathing, posture, visualizing a god and a goddess, touching each other, getting closer and closer, kissing (Jenia passionately, Mircea – trying to control himself).

But, instead of dwelling on this imaginary picture, Andrei's thoughts reverted to the end of that day in 1990, when he returned the old lady in a taxi back to her hotel. He knew that he would be coming back the next day, but dreaded it, feeling drained and exhausted after this day they had spent together. He also felt, in a peculiar way, derided, as if his was the real object of her crazy giggles. He wanted to drink a glass of something strong and he couldn't resist the temptation to walk to a pay phone and dial Ileana's number. She sounded peeved about him departing so abruptly in the morning, yet she invited him back, with a half-laugh, half-sigh. She also sounded tipsy already (which was a good sign). Andrei walked back along the boulevard, crossed the University square and plunged into the labyrinth of narrow streets leading to Ileana. He had to shout under her window to make her come down and open the front door for him. She walked down and unlocked the door. He followed her up the stairs looking at her thin back in the threadbare morning gown, at her unwashed blond hair, at her feet in the ludicrous boudoir slippers with spiky heels and pompoms, and he felt such pity that he had to drink himself into oblivion that night, nearly missing his next day appointment.

In the morning Andrei reached the hotel with a headache throbbing in his temples. He thought he was on time, but Mrs. Jones was already waiting for him in the lobby, sitting in a chair. She didn't have the stick with her. "I am feeling exceptionally good today," she explained with a smile, and indeed she looked fresh: her thin hair seemed more abundant, her eyelashes behind the thick glasses were covered with mascara, she held her back straighter. People age so much slower in the West, thought Andrei. She could actually pass for a sixty-years-old.

"Are we going to the Cișmigiu Park today?" she asked.

"Yes. It is close. We can take a cab…"

"No, no, no cab. I am in the mood for walking. Especially if it is close. Last night I remembered what Mircea had recounted about that park. I will tell you. But let's get going. Give me your arm, young man."

She slid her arm through his, and they walked to the revolving door, only to disengage their arms there. After passing through it, however, they interlocked arms again. For some inexplicable reason, it felt very natural for him, as if he always walked in this neighborhood with old South African ladies on his arm. He had to adapt his steps to hers, but it was not as painful as walking with his grandmother when he had to stop after every step to wait for her to catch up for him: Mrs. Jones walked slowly, but she walked steadily. A large purse hung on her shoulder, swung over her head, postman-like. Andrei wanted to offer to carry it, but decided that it was too womanly a purse, and it would be wrong. Mrs. Jones didn't seem to suffer under its weight. There was a spring in her step that had lacked the day before. Maybe she got over the tiredness after that long flight from Cape Town. Maybe she had a good night's sleep. Maybe she liked the city. Or his company.

They crossed the street, walked past the Palace, turned right before the red-brick Cretulescu church and walked a few steps down, in order to proceed further, towards the park. The architectural beauty of the square was disturbed here by the Sala Palatului, a giant monstrosity built to house a party congress, and the faceless apartment blocks. Mrs. Jones seemed oblivious to all of it, never commenting either on the ugliness or on the devastation of the empty spaces they were passing on their way. Her thoughts seemed to be on the Cișmigiu Park.

"It has a liver-shaped pond, doesn't it? And then another small one, with swans? At least, that's what I remember. He said that couples always came there to snog."

For a moment, Andrei imagined her misunderstanding what Eliade was saying. The silly girl may have thought that, by telling her these things, Mircea was suggesting she should come back to Bucharest with him. Perhaps that's what occupied her thoughts for the past sixty years: the dreams of walking around the Cișmigiu lake arm-in-arm with her red-haired Romanian. Now she is finally about to do it, after having flown for – what, thirteen hours? Just so that she could walk around the lake that a lover told her about two generations ago.

"He said the garden used to belong to a Turkish merchant. Is that true?"

Andrei shrugged.

"Maybe I don't remember exactly," she said. "But I seem to recall what he had told me about that garden a lot better than his talk about the yoga. Perhaps it's because I heard a lot about yoga afterwards, from other teachers. But that garden, this park, I remember him talking about it one evening. He said he once came here with a very rare book that he got from an antique book dealer. Something about a Sybil. How the Delphic Sybil makes herself Apollo's mouthpiece by submitting to the god. And he said, I still remember, I remember he said that he was reading it and suddenly thought: what am I doing here, what is it all for, what can a Sybil possibly have to do with me, why am I even reading any of these books. Such a sense of futility, out of nowhere. Like nothing matters, and you don't know any more why you are here – I don't mean here in the garden, I mean here on earth. He said he had overcome this feeling thanks to his will. He made a conscious effort not to succumb to that apathy. He was very much into 'will,' young Mircea. We all were. Me, too. I thought I could do it alone, take the bull by the horns, so to speak. So, this is the famous garden?"

Andrei was aware that the park wasn't presenting itself in its best condition at the moment. The city did not have enough money to keep it clean or to repair the benches, and there were even more dogs here than on the streets. Parts of the park looked unkempt, wild, as if nobody ever mowed the lawns or cut the tree branches. But Mrs. Jones, clutching his arm, seemed transfixed. She wanted to walk close to the lake, then she looked at the trees in bloom, and then asked: "There are underground tunnels here, right? Secret passages to the river?" When he didn't answer, she said: "And a restaurant? He said was there was a restaurant, or a café, round in shape, on the water."

The restaurant was closed, and they sat down on a bench where, on the back, some words were carved with a knife. Andrei was hoping that Mrs. Jones – Jenia – won't ask him what these words meant. She didn't. She looked around, then searched her bag for cigarettes and offered him one.

He thought that he ought to be ashamed of himself, always smoking her cigarettes, never having any of his own. But he didn't refuse.

"I was thinking, later, when we broke up, why he had reacted like that to that Sybil. I even found the book at an English bookseller's, when I followed Mircea to Calcutta. You know I followed him, right? No, that's not it. You know how he broke up with me? He said 'We met, we were intoxicated with each other, we collaborated on the most miserable fall. Now I must leave.' These were his parting words. I couldn't understand. It

had been so good. He came to my bungalow every night, and we practiced tantric yoga. We were advancing. We already could do that thing where you stop your breath – during sex, of course – and the time stops with you, and you are outside the time. I hope I am not shocking you, young man? No? Well, you see, we were doing very well, Mircea and me. He even told me that he was advancing in other ways, he was working more, he was sleeping less, everything was coming easy to him. And then, suddenly, he decides to leave. Somebody must have said something to him. I don't know. As if there was something wrong with what we were doing. We didn't have a guru, mind you, but ours were just the preliminary steps on the big path towards enlightenment. It was Mircea, actually, who had told me we could do these preliminary steps even in the absence of a guru. And then he suddenly bolts. I just couldn't understand, I couldn't. I thought that maybe it was his way of testing me. A rejection test: to see whether I was strong enough. If I was strong enough to stop seeing him in the midst of that joy, because it was a joy, you know, every day was a joy – and then it all stopped. I tried to stay in the ashram and not to think of him. But then I packed my bag and went to Calcutta. I thought that maybe that's how he had meant it, maybe he wanted to see if I would dare to go after him, maybe it would be a proof of something. I didn't know he already got back with his tart there. Ruth. Or was it Guertie? She lived at that same pension, on the Ripon street, with the Anglo-Indians. He stayed there, and she stayed there, and when I came and knocked at the door, and they let me in, and I saw them there – then I understood that he was sleeping with her now. But I thought to myself again: maybe it was a test, too. Maybe he was testing me with jealousy. To see if I am advanced enough not to mind it. All right then, I thought. I will get rid of it."

She fell silent. Andrei was feeling utterly uncomfortable, but he didn't know what to say, mumbling finally: "So you bought the book?"

"Yes, I did," she answered, "Some ancient author. I came to Mircea again and showed it to him, and I said I had read the paragraph he told me about, about the soul being but a tool for a god, that had so confounded him. But he wasn't very impressed, you know. And then – I tried to become a tart myself!"

She started laughing. She laughed very loudly, not like an old woman, but like a young one, laughing and laughing, although she didn't say anything funny, and her laugh was by no means infectious. Her glasses slipped off her nose and she took them off, putting them inside her purse. Andrei wondered again at how big and white her teeth are. That must

be dentures, he thought, it is not possible to preserve such good teeth into an old age, no matter your hygiene or your health. Her pink tongue protruded between the even rows of her teeth. That tongue was teasing him, daring him to contradict her or to accuse her of lies. All the details of her relationship with Eliade that she was recounting weren't improbable, but they could be easily found in books. She could have been one of these half-crazy impostors who claim to be former Russian princesses, or lovers of some king, or a hero's bastard children. Only why would she want to go through with this? Why would she deliver such a performance only for the benefit of his, Andrei's, eyes and ears? It made no sense. He ought to believe her. Maybe he even ought to write down everything that she was saying, for posterity. But, again, he doubted she was saying anything new. And, on top of that, she spoke with such a sense of bitterness, as if she and Mircea had just broken up a few days ago, not more than half-a-century. Did she still think of it? Was that how she spent the rest of her life, after 1932, rehashing their break up every day in her memory, asking herself why, and wishing it had been different, wishing he had actually taken her back with him to Bucharest, wishing that he had married her? But she must have married somebody else, a Mr. Jones. There must have been a Mr. Jones at some point in her later life. He saw a wedding band on her finger, on her right hand. She must be a widow.

With a sudden agility Mrs. Jones – Jenia – started searching in her bag again. She drew a book out of there. She was triumphantly holding the Gallimard edition of Eliade's novel about his love for Maytreyi Devi, titled, in French, "La nuit bengali." She shook it a few times and then started feverishly turning the pages. She would point out a line, read it aloud, and then continue searching:

"This is the book where he wrote about me," she was saying in a high-pitched, girlish voice, "Only it's not a book about me, mind you, of course not, it's a book about *her.* You see, the first time he meets her, he is so impressed by her arm – by the color of her arm – that he thinks it could be the arm of a goddess. And then he sees her again, and, look, her eyes are too big, her hair is too black, and it all, in his view, combines to making her superhuman. He thinks she is a walking miracle. Then she laughs – she laughs – and he thinks it's a sacrilege to see her laughing! He thinks her beauty is magic. Not the classical kind of beauty – a rebellious kind of beauty. Her beauty was rebellious, he says. What was rebellious about this girl, Andrei? She lived with her parents. I came to India, alone, from Cape Town, I wasn't even twenty yet. But he was infatuated – not with

me – with her. He says he was afraid of her, afraid and joyful at the same time: with me he was never joyful. And if he was afraid in my company, then only of the temptation that could impede his way towards perfection, or that I would make him waste time, but he was never afraid of *me.* He says she has a ferocious thirst of purity. I say she was just brought up that way! She simply didn't know any better. She didn't explore. She had never lived on her own. He loved her for the mystery, but the mystery wasn't hers, I am telling you, Andrei. He invented the mystery he wanted to see. Oh yes, she was a poet. So what? Did he ever even read her poems? And if yes, did he like them? He doesn't say. It means these poems couldn't have been that impressive. He even says himself that he was bewitched by her. He says, here (she kept turning the pages, then triumphantly scratched a line with her red-taloned finger): "I was bewitched and not in love." Yet he persisted in his desire. He knew it was impossible, he knew she'd never marry him and never follow him anywhere. He knew her parents would never consent to their being together. He wouldn't have needed to ask *my* parents, you see. I was a free person. I would have followed him anywhere. Only he didn't want *me.* He says – here – that he felt her life quivering when he held her hand, and here he says (she turned a page) that he looked at her like one looks at a goddess, a goddess that appears naked on a balcony lit by a street lamp, surrounded by flowers…. She was the gates of happiness open into the world, she was unfathomable, a saint, and he was – he says – but a cast, a mold of her soul and her desires. But I – what was I?

She shut the book and sat, panting, angry, with tears in her eyes. In her petulance, she looked no older than forty, and she turned to Andrei, her spine suddenly agile, her face almost unlined:

"When I met Robert Jones, many years later, I thought to myself: 'this one will be mine.' I thought he could be mine, completely. I met him in Cape Town, through friends. He was an accountant, small, bespectacled, always wearing a tie. I asked him out myself, can you believe it? I asked – I hinted – that I wouldn't be opposed to having a glass of wine on the promenade. He got the hint. He came to pick me up in a white shirt and a black tie, and the rest was history. Forty years of wedded bliss, everyone thought. But he had loved another woman before me and he never forgot her. He never got over her, Andrei. All these forty years he lived next to me until he got a heart attack in a bath tub and drowned rather just dying from the blood clot – at least that's what the doctor said – all these forty years he carried a torch for that woman who had rejected him. He never

talked about it. He thought I didn't know. But of course I knew. I felt it. Every second that he spent with me he thought how different it all could have been, had it been with her. He never told me her name, I know that he wanted to forget and couldn't. I even felt pity for him, can you imagine? I found out on my own who she was. One day I drove over and parked my car in a shadow of a big tree near her home. I wanted to see her. I saw her. She was an ugly cow. I almost wanted him to meet her again, but he probably would have still seen that young girl in her that he had such a crush on when he was twenty. And I sat there, in the car, and I thought: what is it about me that I am always on the side lines? Everyone gets a chance, but not me. When God was writing his big book of life, has he, from the outset, thought of me as a secondary character? He looked at me and said: 'You will be a shadow to the others' brightness. You will be but a temptation to overcome. The second-best. The consolation prize. The forgettable one. Because – hear me out! (God may have told me raising his pen above the divine scroll) – in order to create heroes, I need to create cowards, too. And, for true love to exist, there must also be – the unloved.'"

She hung her head so deeply that it almost touched her chest, and sat there as if drunk. Her transformation into a younger woman was so remarkable that Andrei couldn't stop the question escaping from his lips:

"How do you do this?"

She raised her head and smiled at him, her eyes full of tears:

"Do what?"

"This… Changing your age… You have become younger, haven't you?"

Now she laughed.

"I told you he had looked in all the wrong places for his philosopher's stone! After Mircea rejected me, I left Calcutta and went to Sri Aurobindo's ashram, in Pondicherry. I studied the Integral Yoga. His companion was very nice to me. You know that Sri Aurobindo lived with a French woman? We all called her Mother. I learned to integrate all the aspects of my being in that ashram. They didn't scoff at my search of the Absolute… Then I went to Adyar, to the Theosophical Society. I know, I know, you think they were all charlatans. And maybe they were. But I learned things. I learned such things that you cannot imagine. I can teach you, too."

Andrei turned to her. Jenia was looking straight into his eyes, and he saw a bit of spittle in the corners of her mouth. She made a movement as if she wanted to touch his hand, but thought better of it.

"Come tonight to that bar at the hotel. It will be open. They tell me it's open very late into the night. There will be music there. We will dance, we will talk. I will tell you everything. I can teach you how to change time. You will be amazed how easy it is. It's almost like resetting your watch. You just need to want it. We can go up to my room later. I will show you things. You will see."

He looked at her and didn't know what to say.

"Will you come?"

He was silent.

"You have to come tonight. It is now or never. Tomorrow I will be leaving."

He looked down at the ground and nodded.

"Good. I must go now." She put the book and the cigarettes back into her bag. Andrei stood up and offered her his arm. She shook her head: she was strong, agile. "No, no, I will find the way back to the hotel by myself. It is very close. I must go. I feel like playing my violin right now." She turned away from him and raised her hand to make a small gesture of good-bye. Did he hear her say "Pa și pusi," or was it just his hearing playing a trick on him, because he so often used this expression himself, getting away in the morning from yesterday's dates? She said something light and funny and walked away with a spring in her step, a woman of maybe thirty, most of her life still in front of her.

(Many years later he planned a study of immortality myths: Gilgamesh, Odysseus. The alchemists. The count Cagliostro. He wanted to show that the refusal of immortality – rather than being bewailing one's inevitable end, Odysseus feeling Circe rather than Gilgamesh cursing the snake – represented a bolder step in accepting the reality of human condition. The preparation for writing this study seemed to extend itself into several years. He worked slowly and doggedly, as if preparing a court case or a speech that was meant to justify the decision he had made many years ago.

He kept a bottle in the lowest drawer of his desk that he kept locking and then unlocking during a day's work. Whenever he went out with his wife to The Skinner's Arms or to Mabel's Tavern, to the Gradina Eden back in Bucharest, he tried to keep his drinking under control. He never ordered any hard liquor, only beer, and waited after finishing one glass before asking for the next one. Yet he knew that she had recently started keeping a tab on the number of his drinks. She became suspicious, vigilant.

He hoped she would not ask him to choose between her and the alcohol. Because he already knew what choice he would make).

Andrei ironed his best shirt and trousers before putting them on and setting off to the hotel. So this was the night when he would see the famous English bar, the former den of spies, the scene of so many international intrigues! He waited forever for the bus which finally came and took him to the stop closest to the Palace. He walked from there, whistling, along the barely lit, deserted streets. He was again apprehensive that they may not let him in (too young, dressed too poorly), but, to his surprise, they did. Things were, indeed, changing in his country.

He heard the sound of the saxophone when he was still in the lobby, and paused at the door to the bar, transfixed. He saw the portly, garishly dressed men at the tables, formerly, perhaps, Securitate agents or the inhabitants of the underworld who were on their way to becoming the new upper class, the nouveaux riches of Romania, if, in the process, they managed not to get killed in the mob disputes. He saw the women hanging on their arms or sitting at their tables, brash, painted, scantily clad women with improbably long legs and severe mouths. And then there was her.

Jenia Isaac sat alone. She looked no older than twenty, in her pumps and a low-cut dress, with flaxen curls falling on her bare shoulders. Her whole body was turned towards the entrance with a sense of expectancy, and he saw the expression in her blue eyes. They were ravenous, thirsty.

He turned and walked away. Upon leaving the hotel, he inhaled the night air of the big city. In the middle of the vast, deserted square a gypsy woman was selling blue flowers. He went up to her and bought a bunch (only later, on his way through the narrow streets, he wondered, for a few moments, what profit that flower-seller was hoping to make there at night, when no other customers were in sight). He decided to walk to Ileana's place without giving her a call, hoping she wasn't asleep yet nor had another man in her bed already. In half an hour he reached the courtyard in front of her balcony, whistled and then shouted, the flowers in his hand, "Ileana, let me in! It's Andrei down here, and it's getting cold."

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